Berthoud and Covid-19

Hello everyone and welcome to *This is Berthoud*. I'm Amie, your local librarian, and this is the podcast where I get to talk about all of the things that you are talking about so that together we all have something new to think about. Here are my quick disclaimers-- I am your public librarian, which means I am happy to share thoughts about information and its accuracy and how it relates to what is going on in our community, but you won't get medical advice or legal advice or tax advice or really any other advice along those lines on this show.

That being said, we definitely have some complicated issues to discuss here today. I think that if anyone had told me a few months ago that our first library podcast in the Berthoud community would be about a global pandemic, I probably would have laughed. But here we are, with our community caught up in a global pandemic, so that's what we'll talk about today.

Let me complicate things right from the start and say that when people talk about the Covid-19 crisis they already have it wrong. Why-- because by my count, there are actually 6 interrelated but distinct crises happening in the world right now, and several of those crises have subsets. We ought to be talking about the Covid-19 crises, not crisis. I don't say that to alarm anyone, but to help us all take a step back and see the larger picture of what we as a community are facing.

So what are the six crises? First we're facing a health crisis. Even if you've been living under a rock for the last several months I'm sure you know that there is a novel form of coronavirus spreading around the world that is commonly called Covid-19. The problem with this particular strain of coronavirus is it's novelty. The fact that it hasn't been seen in humans before the year or so means that we have a lot of questions about how it spreads from person to person, how it affects the human body, how to treat it, and so on. We also, because it is a novel coronavirus, don't currently have a vaccine to protect us against Covid-19. This virus has revealed that we have a bit of a problem with personal hygiene here in the United States and around the world. After all, the majority of the recommendations from the CDC and the World Health Organization have been straightforward actions like frequently washing hands and keeping our fingers away from our eyes, noses, and mouths, yet the virus is still spreading. We also have a very real concern for our health care workers for a variety of reasons. Obviously we don't want them to come down with Covid-19 themselves, because we want them to be able to continue to care for those who are getting the virus. But we're also beginning to worry about the mental health of those who are working on the pandemic front lines.

But even so Covid-19 is only one subset of the current health crisis-- there are two more. The second health crisis comes from delayed health care treatments. Many believe it is entirely possible that we will see a decline in the general health of our population here because of the restrictions on routine health care visits and other necessary but non-emergency treatments. Some epidemiologists are warning that we'll soon see a spike in diseases like measles or chickenpox. Even though we have vaccines for some of these diseases, the full concentration of the medical community on Covid-19 right now means that an increasing number of people haven't had access to those vaccines, and our herd immunity as a whole could drop. I also know some healthcare workers who are actually out of a job right now because they work in surgery rehab and so few people are allowed to have surgeries. If that doesn't seem like a big deal, think through what happens if hospitals and clinics start to fold because they aren't able to treat anyone, and what happens down the line in areas where there are no longer hospitals and clinics. Rural hospitals and clinics, we know, are particularly susceptible during this kind of

downturn, and so for some the current lack of access to healthcare nearby could become permanent.

The third subset of our health crisis is mental health. People are feeling isolated at home right now. Many are unemployed or unable to finish their schooling, and it seems that right now we're only hearing bad news and generally living in a state of fear. This means that health issues like anxiety, depression, and struggles with addictions are on the rise.

So that's the health crisis, one of six, right? Let's take a look at the economic crisis next. Again, at first glance the problems seem obvious. Unemployment is nearing all-time highs with thousands of people filing for unemployment every week. Many small businesses and even entire industries have been shut down. But there's more to this crisis than we see at first glance also. We are beginning to see issues with supply chains. As an example, the United States frequently imports most of it it's personal protective equipment like face masks. Right now, most of the countries that we typically purchased those things from are not exporting. It's a problem when those things are in short supply. We're also seeing a number of farmers and ranchers having to discard food due to breaks in the chain between them and the consumers. They're being creative, some are selling directly, but it's difficult. But there are even more facets to the economic crisis for us to consider. As thousands of people have had to transition to working from home, productivity has taken a hit. Many people are working in jobs that were never meant to be performed at home, and not everyone has access to adequate equipment or internet access to do their jobs well. Plus study after study has shown that people cannot actually multitask-- ask me sometime, I'll show you the research, it's fun-- so asking people to simultaneously do their job and run the household and care for or educate their children and check on their neighbors and on and on and on means that the productivity and efficiency of our work is decreasing. I can also tell you that Covid-19 is causing an HR nightmare. As employers begin to reopen their businesses, they are allowed to require their employees to return to work except when they're not allowed to require their employees to return to work.   Filing for unemployment when you could be at work constitutes unemployment fraud, but some people have reasons not to return to work due to health or childcare issues or a family member and that might be covered by recent legislation, in which case there is no fraud. Since the legislation related to Covid-19 is changing so quickly, employers are finding it difficult to navigate the rules and enforce them in a fair manner.

That's the health crisis and the economic crisis. Let's move to the governmental crisis. I did say governmental, not political, and that was intentional, folks. It can be easy for us living in U. S. of A. to forget that U. S. stands for United States. While the federal government does have a lot of power, individual states also have a great deal of local control in this country. There are things that the federal government cannot do unless we are at war, which we're not. We may not have had this many questions about balancing federal and state control since the Civil War. Within individual states too, there are things that governors can do and other decisions that they can't make without permission from the state legislatures or the citizens. Even within an individual state there can be tension. For example some people in Colorado, here with us, live in a county that is still asking people to remain at home but work in a county where people are supposed to be returning to work. For today, it doesn't matter whether you think staying at home or going to work is the correct decision. What is important is that you can see that, regardless of which choice is made, one county's health department is given authority over another's. The legality of a united effort to fight a pandemic is something that lawyers and politicians and the courts may be hashing out for a long time to come.

Now we've covered health, economic, and government crises. Let's talk education. Nobody knows yet what kind of long-term effects we're going to see on student achievement now that we closed down the schools for a good chunk of the school year.   All school districts, not just Thompson here, but all school districts, had to transition really quickly to a distance learning format that few, if any, were actually prepared for. Students and educators alike have limited access to some resources like technology, laptops or tablets, or even reliable internet access, which makes it difficult to complete school tasks even when those tasks are available. And a good portion of a student's education is determined by the social interaction that happens both in a classroom and during extracurriculars, which our students are currently missing out on. Even how to begin the next school year is up for grabs, since nobody can be sure how much students may or may not have retained during this year.

So that's four down, two to go. Let's talk about number five, and that's a social crisis. This one also has several subsets. We live in a culture that is increasingly partisan, and the Covid-19 pandemic has not helped. All you have to do is hop on to any social media site to see people declaring their opinions with little-to-no accountability or opportunities to interact in meaningful ways with others whose ideas might differ. We also know that disadvantaged groups have been affected in much greater ways than those with privileges. Unfortunately women, minorities, and small business owners have taken the greatest hit from the economic crisis, and this affects the social status of those people in our community as well. We also know that some people who have been told to stay at home are aware that their homes are the least safe space that they can be in, particularly now that they might be living with abusive individuals who are facing the stress of an economic, or a health, or a governmental crisis. And finally, we are going to have to relearn how to interact with each other in physical places as restrictions begin to lift. In a society where a handshake is considered polite, we're going to have to figure out what the new normal is going to be.

The final crisis we've identified, number 6, is a crisis of information. When it comes to Covid-19, we have to rely on the numbers and the documentation that other nations' governments are willing to share. And unfortunately we have strong reasons to believe that some of those governments are being less than honest. Even worse, that means that there is no good way to make a global comparison of anything because we know that the global numbers are skewed. Even within the United States, the differences in the availability of testing from one area to another make it difficult to determine true trends within this country. So much of the time we are comparing apples and oranges when we think we're looking at apples and apples-- it's a problem. The constant barrage of Covid-19 information from various news agencies makes it difficult for our brains to focus on any other issues that we are facing in this country. That's an information problem too. And whether we like to admit it or not, we have a strong tendency to spread fake news via social media. Why? Our brains like to search for information that backs up our opinions rather than forming opinions based on the information we find. It's backward, but we all do it.   We've had plenty of conversations about spotting fake news at the library, but I sense the need to resurrect some of those classes we've done so that people can learn again how to recognize what is legitimate and what is not.

So there you have it everyone, six crises-- health, economic, governmental, educational, social, and informational-- and our Berthoud community is facing every one of them right now. I'm sure some of you are thinking, "Thanks a lot, Amie, now I'm depressed and stressed out again because things are worse than I thought." That's not why I took you through all this. I did it so that we could get to the good news. Are you ready?

The good news is a two-parter. The first bit of good news is that there are people in leadership positions in this community and in fact all around the world who are actively working on all of these crises in a holistic way, people who have taken a step back and are looking at the larger picture, trying to determine ways to combat one set of problems without exacerbating another. Does that mean everyone is taking thisapproach, or that there aren't some people that you wish would start looking at things that way? Of course that's not true. I'd be a dirty rotten liar if I told you that everyone who got themselves into a position of leadership automatically became an expert on big-picture critical thinking. But I can say with a high degree of certainty and confidence that many of those in the businesses, organizations and agencies that are tackling these problems have at least one person who is considering multiple factors of the recovery process. That's good news, take comfort.

But even better than that is the news that this is as close to a reset for our community as I hope we ever get. Not everyone appreciates the "it could always be worse" mentality, but if you want to come join Amie over here in the cynical corner, we can can come up with any number of scenarios that could make the current situation even worse than it is. We aren't dealing with millions of dollars worth of property damage like we might see after a tornado or a flood. We haven't had half of the community's population wiped out by a virus. All things considered, we've survived the pandemic so far relatively well. That means we still have the majority of the people and resources available to us that we need to come out of this situation stronger and in a better position than we went into all of this-- provided, and here's the catch, we're willing to work on it. We have the opportunity right now to figure out what it is that we love about our community, or what we wish we had here, and work towards that. So what is it? Is it amazing educators in our schools? I don't know, an excellent Little League program? Town board meetings that people actually want to attend? Is it small-town charm? Thriving local businesses? I have to say it-- a vibrant and well-used public library? Whatever it might be, now is the chance to create it, build on it, or leverage the you-know-what out of it. It's such a cliche that I almost don't want to say it… I'm not going to say it…. All right, I'm saying it. You've probably seen this quote floating around on the internet or in self-help books or wherever, but right now it holds true: the best way to predict the future is to create it.

Now I still hear you: "That's easier said than done, Amie." Maybe, maybe not. There are a couple of things we shouldn't do, or rather things that we shouldn't say, because they will make it impossible for us to pull out of this as the kind of community that everyone wants to be part of. The first thing, don't say this, don't think it if you can help it, but definitely don't say it. "They should have known…" Plenty of people in our community are tossing this phrase around right now, and it's pretty detrimental. Let me tell you why. This phrase is being used when we're talking about people in leadership roles, and usually when we're criticizing the actions that one leader or another has taken. "They should have known…" is usually accompanied by the sentiment "and therefore they should have done this or that thing differently." But here's the deal. Nobody hands out foresight to people who find themselves in leadership roles, right? When I took charge of the public library here in town, no one met me at the door and handed me a "here's what's going to happen in the next five years" booklet. Reality is, "they should have known" can be an unfair statement because there isn't any way for them to have known. Time is linear, and we can't know three months ago what was only discovered last week, so give people a little break. But more than that, even when you're right, and sometimes you are right, when things happened in a predictable trajectory and maybe someone should have seen something coming, "they should have known" is a detrimental phrase because it keeps dragging us backwards. Better to let our leaders say, "Based on what we know now, we are going to do this, that, or the other" instead of making them have to continually return to and justify previous decisions. Certainly we need to look back to understand what we've learned, but we need to

move forward and adapt, not stay stuck in the past. "They should have known" gets us into circular arguments. What happened, happened, we can't change it, so let's focus on what's happening right now and what's coming so we can focus on making things right.

The other phrase that isn't helping anyone right now is, "They should just…" We've spent enough time together today, I hope that you get what I mean when I say these are complicated issues with no easy solution. "They should just" is usually followed by an overly simplistic suggestion of an action somebody should have taken, and it's often tied to the now-forbidden "they should have known" phrase. Don't get me wrong, we need people with a single-minded focus because they are often the ones who get things done. But in a time of crisis, or, I caught myself, in a time of crises, we know that if the solution to our problems could be summed up in a simple "they should just" statement, we wouldn't be in the mess that we're in right now.

Now you may be more open-minded than that. In fact, if you've stuck with me this long, I suspect you are more open-minded than that. But you may, either virtually or as we begin to venture out again, run across other people in the "they should just" camp. Be kind. You don't know what is going on in other people's lives and minds, so you don't know why they may choose to focus on only one solution. Maybe they are operating under a great deal of anxiety about a particular outcome, or they're completely committed to and passionate about a certain project, or maybe it's their area of expertise. These people are going to tell you that it isn't possible to worry about more than one crisis at a time. You've probably heard some of these sentiments already: "You want to reopen businesses? I guess you don't care if people die." Or "sure, keep things closed, my constitutional rights don't matter anymore." There are more that I don't need to get into here. Just remember, be kind, but also keep in mind that when people tell you that they can only focus on a single aspect of what is happening in our world right now, they're telling you about their limitations, not yours. If you're already worried about all of these things, then you know full well that it is possible to care about people's health and the economy and our kids' education and your rights as an American and so on all at the same time. These are not mutually exclusive concerns. We need all the open-minded people we can get right now, so please don't let someone else close yours.

On the other hand, if you're still sitting with me in the cynical corner, we know worrying about these things or being concerned doesn't actually solve any of the problems we're facing. You may think that there isn't much you can do. Maybe that's true on a global scale, or a national one, or even at the state level, but right here in our community there are a huge number of paths you can take to help get this community back on track. Do you need some ideas? We're the library, that's what we're here for. If you're able to, stay home. Pretty simple. Ah, wave at your neighbors when you're walking the dog, and watch closely for kids playing when you're driving around town so we can keep our neighborhoods safe. Make a face mask and share one if you can. Check on your neighbors who maybe haven't been able to get out and about, and make sure that they have everything that they need. Decorate a friend's sidewalk with sidewalk chalk. Attend a town board meeting-- they're happening virtually right now so you can do that. Ask the school district how we can best support our community's teachers and other educators. Shop at a local business or buy gift cards. Congratulate a graduating senior or 8th grader you know so that they can feel our community support. Take care of yourself right now-- go for a walk outside, plant a garden, take a day off if you can. Volunteer at the library to critique resumes for those who are looking for work. Donate blood, or give some food to House of Neighborly Service. Contact your representatives, by phone or by email, to let them know what you would like to see happening right now. Even sharing positive messages on Facebook now can help those who are feeling isolated and alone in our community. One thing we know from

working in the library here is that this is a community that is curious and intelligent and caring, so there isn't any good reason for us to not come out of this successfully if we work together through these big issues. If you think the little actions don't matter much, just consider what can happen if thousands of people in this community all take these steps together. Even cynical Amie over here in the corner has to acknowledge the power of thousands of people working together to solve problems. So go do it. We're looking forward to helping you with all the projects that you undertake to help this community thrive.

We're certainly facing unprecedented challenges as a community, but they aren't insurmountable. If you have any thoughts you'd like to share, we'd love to hear them. You can get in touch with me, Amie, at the Berthoud Library. The phone number at the library is 970-532-2757, or you can email me at podcast.bcld@gmail.com.   Thank you so much for listening, and I'm proud to say *This is Berthoud*.